Developing Practice-Oriented Theory on Collaboration: A Paradox Lens

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Abstract

Collaboration is present throughout public administration as a means to address social issues that sit in the inter-organizational domain. Yet research carried out over the last three decades concludes that collaborations are complex, slow to produce outputs, and by no means guaranteed to deliver synergies and advantage. For these reasons, this article explores whether a 'paradox lens' can aid the development of practice-oriented theory to help those who govern, lead and manage collaboration in practice. It draws on a long standing research program on collaboration and a synthesis of literature on paradox of relevance to collaboration. The article develops five propositions on the application of a paradox lens that explicitly recognizes the context of collaboration as inherently paradoxical; acknowledges the limitation of mainstream theory in capturing adequately the complex nature of and tensions embedded in collaborative contexts and uses the principles of paradox to develop practice-oriented theory on governing, leading and managing collaborations.

Society's most challenging issues are complex and multi-faceted beyond the reach of any single organization to tackle effectively on its own. Regardless of problem domain—be it poverty, health, education, terrorism, migration or climate change—the boundaries between states, markets and civil society in addressing challenging social issues are increasingly blurred. Collaborations, in the shape of formalized joint working arrangements between independent public, private and nonprofit organizations, are thus seen as necessary means to addressing major issues facing society today (e. g. Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2015; Heinrich, et al., 2004; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Ospina and Foldy, 2015; Quick and Feldman, 2014; Thomson and Perry, 2006; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Yet research over the last three decades concludes that collaborations are complex, slow to produce outputs, and by no means guaranteed to deliver synergies and advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; O'Leary and Bingham, 2009; Saz-Carranza, 2012).

While a number of factors contribute to the challenge of collaboration, research increasingly point to inherent paradoxes and associated governance, leadership and management tensions (e.g. Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Connelly, et al., 2006; Das and Teng, 2000; Huxham and Beech, 2003; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Saz-Carranza, 2007; Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2010; Tschirhart, et al, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2003 and 2012; Zeng and Chen, 2003). These studies usually draw on definitions of paradox put forth by contemporary organizations theorists that emphasise the existence of contradictory, interrelated, mutually exclusive elements (e. g. Lewis, 2000; Lewis and Smith, 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Smith and Berg, 1987; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Quinn and Cameron, 1988). Following a review into 25 years of paradox research in management science, Schad et al (2016, 6) offer a summarising definition of paradox as 'persistent

contradiction between interdependent elements'. As collaborations are vital in addressing societal challenges yet frequently unable to deliver successful outputs in practice, this article explores whether a 'paradox lens' can aid the development of practice-oriented theory to help those who govern, lead and manage them. Specifically, the article develops five propositions on the application of a paradox lens that:

- explicitly recognizes the context of collaboration as inherently paradoxical
- acknowledges the limitation of mainstream theory in capturing adequately the complex nature of and tensions embedded in these contexts
- uses the principles of paradox to develop practice-oriented theory on governing, leading and managing collaborations

Conceptual foundation

The article draws on an extensive program of empirical research into governing, leading and managing collaborations that has been on-going for more than two decades (Vangen and Huxham, 2014) and a synthesis of relevant literature on collaboration and paradox. The program has focused on themes—including goals, trust, power, culture, communication, governance, leadership, identity and membership structures—identified from research with practitioners as impacting on the success of a collaboration. Ensuing theoretical conceptualizations typically depict the complexity inherent in collaborative situations and the resulting challenges that are intrinsic to them.

The program relies primarily on research-oriented action research (RO-AR), which involves a process of conceptual theorizing from data gathered during organizational interventions on matters that are of genuine concern to the organizational participants and

over which they need to act (Eden and Huxham, 2006). It has involved interventions in numerous contexts and with participants whose roles have ranged from directing collaborations to representing specific stakeholder groups as members. The collaborations have ranged from simple dyads to complex international networks and have spanned public policy including health, area development and regeneration, education, social welfare and many more.

RO-AR is similar to ethnography in that insight is drawn from naturally occurring data (Galibert, 2004; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993) and a practice ontology in that it requires 'a tolerance for complexity and ambiguity' and engagement with organizational life through 'observing and working with practitioners' (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, 1249). In addition, in RO-AR, the intervention is explicitly intended to change the way that practitioners think about or act in the situation. Theoretical insight is derived emergently (Eisenhardt, 1989) in a manner that has some similarities to the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998) and with a specific focus on the development of theory that is meaningful for use in practice. Typically, this yields conceptualizations that captures the complexities of organizational life through the 'highlighting of issues, contradictions, tensions and dilemmas', rather than through generating synthetic explanatory variables (Langley 1999). Theorizing practice-oriented research in ways that meet the dual requirement of practice and the advancement of the field of knowledge is not straight forward (Pettigrew, 1997; Eden and Huxham, 2006). As pointed out by Feldman and Orlikowski 'practice accounts do not always conform to some readers' and some reviewers' expectations of conventional management science' (2011, 1249). Furthermore, deriving useful conceptualizations is inevitably an iterative process that entails experimenting with different possible ways of writing concepts (Eden and Huxham, 2006; Huxham and Hibbert, 2011).

In what follows, five propositions explicating why and how a paradox lens is a suitable framing device for researchers aiming to develop practice-oriented theory about governing, leading and managing collaborations are developed. The first proposition highlights the paradoxical nature of the context of collaboration. The second proposition advocates the use of a paradox lens as an integral part of research on collaboration. The last three propositions focus on the development of theoretical constructs that can aid sense making, and highlight the nature of agency in relation to governing, leading and managing collaborations.

Throughout the article, synthesis of extant research on collaboration and on the use of paradox in research on collaboration, help derive the propositions and salient issues in generating practice-oriented theory. Example conceptualizations are included to illustrate the validity and utility of the propositions. In particular, the development of propositions three, four and five draws on a specific intervention that addressed the management of cultural diversity from the perspective of a major international organization and its many collaborative partners throughout the world. In terms of theory development, the intervention led to the conceptualization of a 'culture paradox' and a set of five inter-related management tensions (see Vangen and Winchester, 2014; Vangen, 2016).

The Paradoxical Nature of Collaborative Contexts

Throughout the world, public organizations collaborate across organizational, professional, sectorial and sometimes national boundaries to deal more effectively with complex, multi-faceted issues and problems that are beyond individual organizations' capabilities to tackle effectively on their own. The literature is rich in examples where partners as diverse as nonprofit, commercial and faith-based organizations collaborate with schools, social enterprises, community groups and public agencies. The general premise

underpinning such collaborative arrangements is that differences between organizations—including their areas of expertise, assets, knowhow, priorities, cultures and values—constitute unique resources that, when brought together create the potential for synergies and collaborative advantage (Gray, 1989; Lasker et al., 2001; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Quick and Feldman, 2014; Bryson et al, 2016). Importantly then, collaborative advantage is achieved via the synthesis of differences. It thus requires working arrangements that simultaneously protect and integrate partners' uniquely different resources for the furtherance of joint collaborative goals (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Shaver, 2006; Quick and Feldman, 2014; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). In these kinds of inter-connected contexts autonomous organizational units deliver services and remits within traditional, vertical, command-and-control relationships. Yet they also participate in a variety of horizontal collaborative relationships that support the delivery of join goals (Heinrich et al., 2004; Ospina and Foldy, 2015). Additionally, when the joint work addresses major social issues in the public domain, the collaborative arrangements tend to be highly dynamic owing to changing public policies and varying stakeholder engagement and preferences (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Cropper and Palmer, 2008; Thomson and Perry, 2006; Quick and Feldman, 2014). This necessary combination of both autonomous organizational hierarchies and collaborative governance structures is recognized in extant research as a source of multiple paradoxes (see e. g. Huxham, 2000; Ospina and Foldy, 2015). In this sense, the notion of paradox recognizes collaborative contexts as complex webs of overlapping, dynamic, hierarchies and systems that comprise competing designs and processes that are necessary to achieve desired outcomes.

The idea that collaborative contexts are inherently paradoxical containing 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' (Schad et al, 2016, 6) is recognized implicitly and explicitly in extant literature. For example, research suggests, paradoxically,

that *both* similarities and difference in member organizations' goals influence the success of a collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2012). When partners have similar organizational goals, agreement on joint collaboration goals can follow more easily (O'Leary and Bingham, 2009; Thomson and Perry, 2006). Yet similar goals suggest that partners may have competitive interests that leave them reluctant to cooperate and share information (Tschirhart, et al, 2005; Provan and Kenis, 2008). For example, community groups and nonprofit organizations often compete for scarce resources. Hence the need to convince funders about their organization's ability to produce public and social value, over and above that of potential partners, can make collaboration difficult in practice. Differences in goals also facilitate collaboration as it implies greater synergies from diversity of resources but this can also lead partners to seek different and sometimes conflicting outcomes (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Percival, 2009). For example, faith-based organizations, community groups and schools frequently have conflicting value bases and goals. Yet such diverse institutions are often partners in implementing public policy pertaining to issues such as public health, social wellbeing and area regeneration where their value bases and goals would suggest different priorities and approaches. This 'goals paradox' shows that goal congruence and diversity is in tension rendering the management of goals challenging in practice. The general premise of collaboration and evidence from its implementation in practice, yields the ***first proposition***:

> *Collaborations that have the potential to achieve collaborative advantage are inherently paradoxical in nature. The paradoxical nature arises because gaining advantage requires the simultaneous protection and integration of partners' uniquely different resources, experiences, and expertise in complex, dynamic organizing contexts.*

The paradox lens offers a way of recognizing explicitly the inter-organizational context of collaboration as one that is characterized by contradictions and compromises.

Individuals thus operate in a context wherein tensions cannot be resolved *per se* but rather, opposing management actions are integral to the complex systems within which work takes place (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). Sustainable high performance in these contexts requires practitioners to embrace multiple, opposing forces simultaneously (Lewis and Smith, 2014). If the aim of research is to develop better contextualized theory about governing, leading and managing collaborations, then recognizing explicitly the context of collaboration as one that is paradoxical in nature will have important implications for empirical research and theoretical development.

Investigating Collaboration Using a Paradox Lens

In terms of empirical research, the application of a paradox lens entails examining how seemingly contradictory, multiple forces, coexist and what the implications are for managing these simultaneously. This is in contrast to a contingency approach (Lawrence and Lorsh, 1967) whereby research aims to identify and highlight opposing forces and explore conditions where each should be the focus of management (Lewis and Smith, 2014). While the paradox lens has been used extensively in organization theory (e. g. Lewis, 2000; Lewis and Smith, 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Smith and Berg, 1987; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Quinn and Cameron, 1988) its use in research on collaboration is less established. Nevertheless, researchers have begun to use paradox more explicitly in research on collaboration to frame issues, and highlight and describe interesting tensions, oppositions, and contradictions in ways that are both conceptually appealing and practically useful (e. g. Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Das and Teng, 2000; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010; Saz-Carranza

2007 and 2012; Vangen and Huxham, 2012; Vangen and Winchester, 2014; Zeng and Chen, 2003).

The idea that collaborations can be understood as highly paradoxical contexts is thus beginning to influence the methods that researchers use to study collaboration phenomena. In general, researchers have argued that mainstream theories—such as transaction cost theory, game theory, resource dependency theory, agency theory, and strategic behavior theory—do not adequately capture the complexity of collaboration. They have thus begun to use paradox to represent more adequately the complex nature of, and tensions embedded in, these contexts. For example, arguing that mainstream theories cannot fully address the instability of strategic alliances, Das and Teng (2000) develop a framework of internal tensions focusing on cooperation versus competition, rigidity versus flexibility, and short-term versus long-term orientations. They describe why and how these three tensions play out in strategic alliances and conclude that there is a need to maintain a delicate balance of several pairs of competing forces. Similarly, Zeng and Chen (2003) argue that though dominant theories—including transaction cost economics, organizational learning and resource dependence theories—have greatly enhanced knowledge of alliance management, these theories lack a grasp on the complex interdependencies between cooperation and competition among partners. They explore the use of social dilemma theory to study this tension between interdependent parties in alliances and subsequently identifies propositions for partnership management. As a final example, Clarke-Hill et al (2003) argue that a multi-paradigm approach (combining strategic positioning, resources-based view, and game theory) provides a better framework than do orthodox theories in exploring the contradictory, interactive, and dynamic nature of strategic alliances. They suggest that alliance partners should not choose between cooperation and competition, but seek to manage the tension between them because their contradictory duality is part of the complex business reality. These examples all relate to strategic alliances that as

dyads are structurally simple. In comparison, collaborations that address challenging societal issues tend to include many diverse partners. Hence it is reasonable to deduce that mainstream theories cannot adequately facilitate research in these latter contexts.

The literature includes a few examples where paradox has been used in research on public sector collaborations (e. g. Connelly, 2006; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Sedgwick, 2014; Vangen and Huxham, 2003; 2012). For example, in an empirical project focusing on leaders of successful networks, the researchers link paradox and collaboration to better understand network management (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). Here, two paradoxes; unity versus diversity and confrontation versus dialogue, which emerged from narrative inquiry (Ospina and Dodge, 2005), were subsequently used conceptually to empirically document how leaders manage paradox (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, 431). In terms of collaborative leadership, the findings suggest that successful leaders respond in ways that honour both sides of the paradoxes. They do so by effectively addressing contradictory demands through inward focused activities that facilitate interaction, cultivate relationships and promote openness and through outward focused activities that emphasize managing credibility, multi-level working and cultivating relationships. In terms of methodology, the example illustrates the use of the paradox lens in analysing and conceptualizing management implications for practice.

In other examples, paradox is used as an analytical lens to examine collaborative paradoxes with reference to varying collaborative activities (Sedwick, 2014), document the types of paradoxes that typically feature in collaborations (O'Leary and Vij, 2012) or to develop theoretical constructs that may be used reflectively to support practice (Huxham and Beech, 2003; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). These examples show the kinds of contextualized knowledge advancement that can be gained by using paradox as an integral part of research methods in the investigation of collaborations. In

summary, these studies identify new paradoxes and tensions, describe and elaborate upon these, and explore possible governance, leadership, and management responses to them. This review of cases where paradox form an integral part of research methods on collaboration suggests the ***second proposition***:

> *A paradox lens can be used to enhance research on collaborations. It can overcome the limitations of mainstream theory by capturing better the complex nature of and tensions embedded in collaborative contexts. It can help researchers analyze and conceptualize implications for collaboration in practice.*

The paradox lens is proposed as a useful integral component of research methodology to complement other more common linear sequential approaches to research on collaboration (Saz-Carranza, 2012). The use of the paradox lens, as explored in the next section, can help develop better contextualized theoretical constructs to inform the governance, leadership and management of collaboration.

Theorizing about Collaboration Using the Paradox Lens

The development of the first two aspects of the paradox lens brings to the fore the inherently paradoxical nature of collaborative contexts and the idea that main stream theories cannot adequately capture the complex nature of, and management tensions embedded in, these contexts. Building on the propositions developed in the previous two sections, in this section the focus is on using the paradox lens explicitly to develop practice-oriented theoretical conceptualizations about collaborations. The analysis suggests that the paradox lens may inform the development of theoretical conceptualizations through a focus on: detecting and naming paradoxes; identifying and expressing tensions; and developing

reflexive conceptual constructs. In what follows, a proposition pertaining to each of these is developed via a synthesis of literature on paradox and excerpts from the RO-AR project on cultural diversity.

Detecting and Naming Paradoxes

In the organization literature, there is a generic discussion about different ways of working with paradox and whether paradoxes need to be removed or resolved (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000). We can note that resolution, according to Poole and Van de Ven (1989), does not imply the elimination of a tension but rather, a need to address tensions in ways that account appropriately for contrasting demands. Nevertheless, if the context of a collaboration is inherently paradoxical, and this is a necessary condition for synergy and advantage, then tensions certainly cannot be resolved *per se*. Instead, as has been argued throughout this article, there is a need to embrace the existence of paradox while simultaneously accepting that in practice, some kind of resolution is required in as far as enabling agency is concerned.

The literature also highlights that paradoxes and tensions are not the most comforting of concepts for individuals who need to act. The primary reason is that paradoxes do not lend themselves to actions that apply formal logic based on internal consistency. Instead, paradoxes emphasize distinction and inconsistencies. This then can trigger some anxiety and feelings of being 'stuck' for individuals who have to make sense of underlying tensions (Smith and Berg, 1987) and decide how to act in practice. Consequently, research suggests, there may be a tendency for actors to seek strategies for consistency to regain clarity and control (Cialdini et al., 1995) or take actions that seemingly avoid rather than confront tensions (Lewis, 2000). This may include splitting, polarizing, and choosing between

opposing forces (Lewis, 2000); choosing one polarity over another can serve to highlight the need for the other, which in turn may trigger defense mechanisms and hamper learning (Foldy, 2004; Saz-Carranza, 2007).

For example, the RO-AR project highlighted that cultural diversity is now an increasingly common aspect of public sector collaboration (Foldy, 2004; Im, 2013; Oberfield, 2015). On the one hand, extant research suggests that cultural similarities can enhance inter-connectivity and shared understanding between partners (Beamish and Lupton, 2009; Pothukuchi et al., 2002). On the other hand, cultural diversity can cause conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction (Bird and Osland, 2006; Kumar and Nti, 2004; Prevot and Meschi, 2006; Shenkar et al., 2008). For these latter reasons, research has typically focused on managing conflicts in culturally diverse contexts through a three stage process of recognition, research and reconciliation (Bird and Osland, 2006; van Marrewijk, 2004). In the complex, dynamic context of inter-organizational collaboration, this approach is of limited value because it assumes that conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction are both identifiable and manageable. As inter-organizational collaborations are typically characterized by multiple dynamic interacting cultural 'communities of belonging' pertaining to for example national, organizational and professional cultures (Gibbs, 2009; Kelly et al., 2002, Sirmon and Lane, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014; Vangen, 2016), the idea that cultural issues are both identifiable and manageable does not generally hold muster. It is also the case that partners' culturally diverse insights, skills and experiences are resources that when harnessed can help a collaboration address issues in new and alternative ways and so achieve synergistic gains (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Foldy, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). This value of cultural diversity is not generally recognized in the 'recognition, research and reconciliation' approach to addressing cultural diversity.

These competing logics lead to the identification of a contradiction pertaining to the role of cultural diversity in collaboration that can be named a 'culture paradox'. It suggests that 'cultural diversity is simultaneously a source of advantage and a source of inertia' as illustrated in figure 1 below. The paradox explicitly acknowledges the benefits of cultural diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Kelly et al., 2002) as well as associated conflicts, misunderstandings and points of frictions (Bird and Osland, 2006; Kumar and Nti, 2004; Prevot and Meschi, 2006; Shenkar et al., 2008).

[Figure 1 here]

The RO-AR project on cultural diversity highlights a paradox and inherent tensions that cannot be resolved *per se*. The nature of paradoxical tensions is such that actions and choices will trigger new situations and new tensions *ad infinitum.* Nevertheless, using paradox constructs to convey that there cannot be easy answers can be reassuring and thus empowering for those who need to act (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). To that end, researchers may usefully identify and name the conceptualization of paradox in ways that identify contradictory yet valid and coexisting features of the collaborative arrangements. This can in turn enhance understanding about how to manage them. Hence, the ***third proposition*** is:

> *A paradox construct detected and named via research has the potential to aid understanding and sense-making. It can reduce practitioners' anxiety through emphasizing why there cannot be one optimal solution to aid action in practice.*

This proposition points out that researchers may want to strive for *clarity* in expressing a paradox and its related tensions. A concise statement that explicates the nature of a paradox can both contribute to knowledge about governing, leading, and managing collaborations and enhance the usability of that theoretical concept in practice. Similarly, subsequent paradoxical tensions will need to be expressed in a manner that informs sense

making and reduces anxiety for individual actors. This can be achieved through ensuring that the rationale behind the paradox, and hence nature of resolution, is understood. Naming a clear paradox, such as the culture paradox, makes explicit the need for research and theory development to emphasize both the potential conflicts and benefits of an aspect of the collaborative context—in the current example this is cultural diversity. There is also a 'common sense' quality to this statement, which suggests that it may be applicable in general to culturally diverse collaborations in practice.

Identifying and Expressing Paradoxical Tensions

If the aim is to enhance understanding, aid sense making, and help practitioners decide how to act in specific situations, then theoretical conceptualization clearly needs to go beyond the naming of a paradox. In terms of defining and expressing paradoxical tensions, the 'common sense' quality of theoretical constructs as mentioned above is an important aspect of practice-oriented theory. Beyond that, Huxham and Beech (2003) suggest that researchers need to consider how conceptualizations may be framed in order to capture practitioners' expressed needs. If theorizing is concerned with paradoxical tensions, then the generation of useful practice-oriented theory cannot be about the provision of good practice prescriptions as these are not implementable in practice (Huxham and Beech, 2003). Nor can it be, as highlighted throughout this article, about negating paradoxical tensions. It can however be about asking questions (being reflexive) with respect to how tensions are managed (Bouchikhi, 1998; Saz-Carranza, 2007).

The literature includes examples where researchers have designed processes wherein paradoxes facilitate managers' engagement with the management questions. For example, Lüscher and colleagues used action research to explore organizational change paradoxes with

practitioners. It entailed a ‘collaborative sense-making process’ of working with paradoxes that helped practitioners move from either/or interpretations toward a paradox perspective that, the authors report, enabled managerial action (Lüscher et al., 2006; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Similarly, Huxham and Beech (2003) argued that the use of practice management tensions within a ‘reflective practice approach’ will facilitate practitioners to make choices. Huxham and Vangen (2005) found that raising awareness, via ‘capacity-building events’, of the types of paradoxes and tensions that typically arise will enhance practitioners’ ability to manage them in ways that are appropriate to their particular situation. These examples show that theoretical constructs, expressed as paradoxes, emphasize tensions that are not simple and static. They highlight that any action requires judgment and choice (reflexivity). Yet the differentiation integral to the paradox lens can help identify aspects of competing demands and creative ways of integrating those demands (Suedfeld et al., 1992).

The second extract from the RO-AR project on cultural diversity provides an example of how paradoxical tensions, derived from empirical data, may be identified and expressed. Initial thematic data analysis on the large amount of data gathered, resulted in the identification of 29 themes on topics ranging from perceptions and behaviors embedded in different national, organizational, and professional cultures to challenges relating to communication, decision making, and accountability. Further analysis, guided by the named culture paradox, led to the identification of five areas of inter-related management tensions pertaining to: believes about how cultural sensitivity may be developed; level of organizational adjustment within a collaboration; individual agency and orientation toward the collaboration versus own organization; the quantity and extent of cultural diversity within a collaboration; and the nature of communication and knowledge sharing (Vangen and Winchester, 2014; Vangen, 2016).

Guided by the method developed by Huxham and Beech (2003), further conceptualizations focused on expressing the key tension within each of these areas. It entailed identifying extreme opposite yet equally valid forms of possible actions from the data. As suggested by Huxham and Beech (2003), such extreme opposites are unlikely to be implementable in practice, the tensions serve as means to identifying the nature of compromises and trade-offs that may be required in practice. As the tensions emerged out of sensitively analyzed, naturally-occurring data, they are likely to capture practitioners' genuine concern. The five tensions, as listed in figure 2, are thus examples of the kinds of management tensions that surface when the aim is to harness cultural diversity towards the achievement of collaborative advantage. Further elaboration on these tensions can be found in Vangen and Winchester (2014) and Vangen (2016) but for illustrative purposes, one of the tensions is described in more detail in the next section.

[Figure 2 here]

Identifying and expressing paradoxical tensions, such as those pertaining to the culture paradox, can help researchers convey insight about the management of collaborations in ways that can aid practitioners in practice. Importantly however, the inevitably dynamic nature of tensions imply that, no matter how carefully identified and expressed, tensions will not be of a definitive and permanent quality. Nevertheless, it is possible to develop theoretical constructs that when used reflectively (and reflexively) can inform both theory and practice. Hence, the ***fourth proposition*** is that:

> *The theoretical concepts should go beyond simple labeling to elaborate on the kinds of tensions that arise for governing, leading and managing collaboration in practice.*

This proposition highlights that researchers need to extend conceptualizations in ways that are reassuring for practitioners who need to make reflexive judgements in practice. Well

expressed tensions not only contribute to knowledge on governing, leading and managing collaborations but begin to provide conceptual handles for reflection by practitioners in practice.

Developing Reflexive Conceptual Constructs

Bearing in mind the conceptual qualities of 'clarity' and 'common sense', one of the problems with paradoxes and tensions, as pointed to in the literature, is the idea that paradoxes are themselves paradoxical. They are both confusing and understandable and common and surprising (Quinn and Cameron, 1988; Schad et al., 2016). Indeed, the process of conceptualizing entails building concepts that accommodate contradictions. 'Rather than polarize phenomena into either/or notions, researchers need to use both/and constructs for paradoxes, allowing for simultaneity and the study of interdependence' (Lewis, 2000, 773). As such, the process of conceptualizing paradoxical tensions can in itself be seen as paradoxical; the necessary differentiation highlights contradiction, yet the act of differentiation also helps integration.

Having named a paradox and expressed associated tensions (as exemplified in figures 1 and 2), researchers can elaborate the theoretical constructs through focusing on the identification of positive and negative aspects of agency that favor one pole of the tension over the other. This process of diversification can in turn be used constructively to identify intermediate positions where agency can be enacted. Though theoretical conceptualizations may include suggestions of possible intermediate positions (for example, where these have emerge from empirical data analysis), the constructs can also be used reflectively by practitioners to aid their judgment and identification of possible intermediate positions in specific contexts of practice (Huxham and Beech, 2003). Importantly, the identification of

positive and negative aspects of agency can help practitioners question alternative ways of doing things. It is this questioning that enables practitioners to be consciously reflexive in their management of paradoxical tensions.

For example, as illustrated by the third extract from the RO-AR project on cultural diversity, the tension between, 'bespoke learning versus generic learning' (figure 2) captures contrasting believes about how cultural sensitivity of relevance to a particular collaborative situation may be developed. Elaborated briefly, the tension is about developing 'bespoke' communication processes that are sensitive to partners' culturally determined needs versus adopting a generic form of communication to enact the collaborative agenda (see Vangen, 2016). Being able to accommodate partners' specific culturally determined communication preferences can help avoid misunderstandings and build trust. Yet doing so may not be pragmatically possible. This theoretical tension captures the idea that awareness about cultural diversity is essential to working effectively in culturally diverse collaborative contexts, but that the pitfalls of 'stereotyping' and 'superiority' are inherent in the process of learning. It suggests that any description of cultural diversities inevitably carries the danger of expressing similarities and differences in 'stereotypical' manners (Osland and Bird, 2000). Furthermore, it suggests that in encountering differences, partners may (sometimes subconsciously) conceive of one culture as superior to another or seek to impose a specific culture over the collaboration (Salk and Shenkar, 2001, Sheer and Chen, 2003, Walsh, 2004). Both these practices can yield highly inaccurate depictions of how cultural diversities interact in any particular collaboration. It is this that gives rise to the particular management tension between, on the one hand, seeing cultural sensitivity as something that can be developed without the specific context and on the other hand, seeing the development of cultural sensitivity as something that must be situated in the particular context.

In this particular tension, the right pole depicts cultural diversity as detectable and stable enough to support the idea that cultural diversity can be learned without individuals being embedded in the specific collaborative context. The left pole depicts culture as socially constructed and dynamic and supports the idea that cultural sensitivity can at best be developed in context. Either view—as illustrated in figure 3 below—implies different benefits and advantages in as far as agency is concerned. The elaboration seeks to highlight that developing cultural sensitivity in inter-organizational, cross national collaborative contexts – in the pursuit of collaborative advantage—inevitably requires compromises and trade-offs in practice. It is the culture paradox—the idea that cultural diversity is simultaneously a source of advantage and a source of inertia—that gives rise to the specific trade-offs and compromises, which in turn can usefully aid management in practice towards the achievement of collaborative advantage.

[Figure 3 here]

In differentiating between two extremes poles, it is helpful to explain the rationale pertaining to each—and so enhance acceptance of a paradox and associated tensions. The compromises necessary with reference to one pole will also suggest the type of compromises that are necessary with reference to the other pole. The differentiation thus highlights the value of each alternative, which in turn can identify actions and help avoid situations where one alternative continually dominates the other. Similarly, the increased appreciation of the value of each extreme pole allows for better-informed integration, including enhanced possibility for new, creative solutions to emerge that may ultimately enable longer-term success. Hence, the ***fifth proposition*** is:

> *The theoretical concepts should help practitioners recognize and accept the strengths and weaknesses associated with contradictory, equally valid, but opposing solutions*

to governing, leading, and managing collaborations. It should do so in ways that are transparent, thus enabling effective reflection in practice.

This proposition points to the need for appropriate conceptual *elaboration* in expressing the paradox and the related tensions. The emphasis on tentativeness is an important aspect of this; paradoxical tensions as pointed out above are not definitive and permanent in nature. And collaborations themselves are idiosyncratic and dynamic and so conceptualizations about how to manage inherent tensions have to rely on careful judgment for deriving specific solutions (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vlaar et al., 2007; Weber and Khademian, 2008). This current research suggests that, in constructing paradox, researchers could aim for generality in the expression of the paradox itself. For example, it was pointed out above that the culture paradox has a generic quality that renders it immediately applicable to culturally diverse collaborations. In going beyond the paradox to the identification and subsequent elaboration of inherent tensions, research can offer frameworks for more in-depth exploration that enhances understanding in practice.

A comment on methods for developing practice-oriented theory

Research-oriented action research and other forms of qualitative research that engage with practice are particularly appropriate for developing contextualized theory that relates closely to practice (Eden and Huxham, 2006; Huxham and Hibbert, 2011; Pettigrew, 1997). Yet it was not the intention, in this article, to propose that all practice-oriented theory development about collaboration requires the use of qualitative research, paradox and related constructs. However, if researchers choose to use these, then the five propositions can serve as pointers while researchers retain their creativity and integrity in the articulation and

description of paradox and related tensions. Such constructs can undoubtedly form an integral part of otherwise contextualized theoretical outputs.

The five propositions, along with the examples, are presented at an opportune time, as qualitative research methods including action research are increasingly popular (Aguinis et al., 2009; O'Reilly et al., 2012). It responds to numerous specific requests from researchers who seek exemplars of theory building from qualitative research and in particular action research. Though the specific examples provided in this article are brief, individuals who are interested can find more detail in the articles where they were originally published.

This article has made a contribution through focusing on the paradoxical nature of collaboration in general and through highlighting implications of this for investigating and theorizing about collaboration. The RO-AR project on cultural diversity illustrated here is qualitative in its entirety. This is not to suggest that the paradox lens is not applicable to quantitative methods. Rather, as pointed out by Schad et al (2016), the majority of empirical articles in the literature relies on qualitative data. However, the article highlights the merits of using a paradox lens to develop contextualized theory on collaboration. It thus invites researchers to explore different uses—in both quantitative and qualitative methods—of a paradox lens as an integral part of investigating and theorizing about collaboration.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the application of a paradox lens to enhance theory development for the practice of collaboration. Drawing on relevant literature and empirical research, it developed five propositions that can help researchers develop contextualized theory about collaboration using a paradox lens. The first highlights the paradoxical nature of collaboration indicating that tensions, contradictions and compromises

are integral to success in these contexts. The second highlights the merits of using a paradox lens as an integral part of research methodology. These two propositions are important building blocks for the remaining three, which address directly the aim of developing practice-oriented theory. Using the example of cultural diversity and collaboration, the latter three propositions show, in a sequential manner, how the paradox lens can be used by researchers to develop theoretical constructs. Such constructs can inform reflexive and reflective practice and aid practitioners in their active responses to all kinds of paradoxes and paradoxical tensions.

The article does not claim that these propositions constitute an exhaustive list nor that all applications of paradox to the study of collaboration need to adopt the principles inherent in these. Yet they are clearly important in highlighting the inherently paradoxical nature of collaborative contexts, how the paradox lens can contribute to research methods and how to theorize about collaboration phenomena in ways that are meaningful in practice. In essence, they show how the paradox lens can help derive contextualized theoretical concepts relevant to the complex context of collaboration. For the practice of collaboration, the acceptance of the paradoxical nature of collaboration, with its intrinsic tensions, can ultimately lead to consideration of realistic rather than idealistic expectations of what can be achieved. Hence, if the research aims are to generate practice-oriented theory that simultaneously captures some of the complexity that underpins the inter-organizational collaboration phenomenon under investigation, and to convey this in a manner that is appropriate for use in practice, then using the paradox lens can be fruitful.

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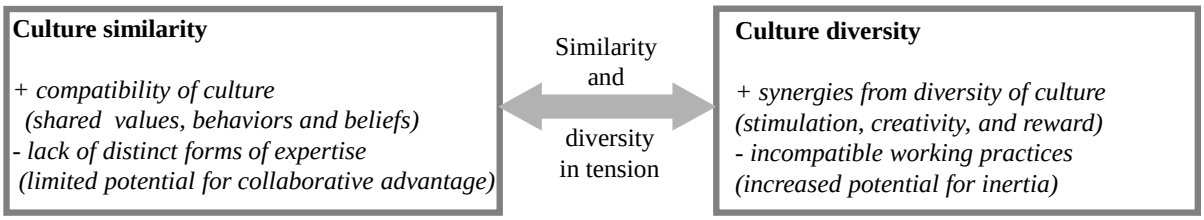

Figure 1: Example construct: A culture paradox

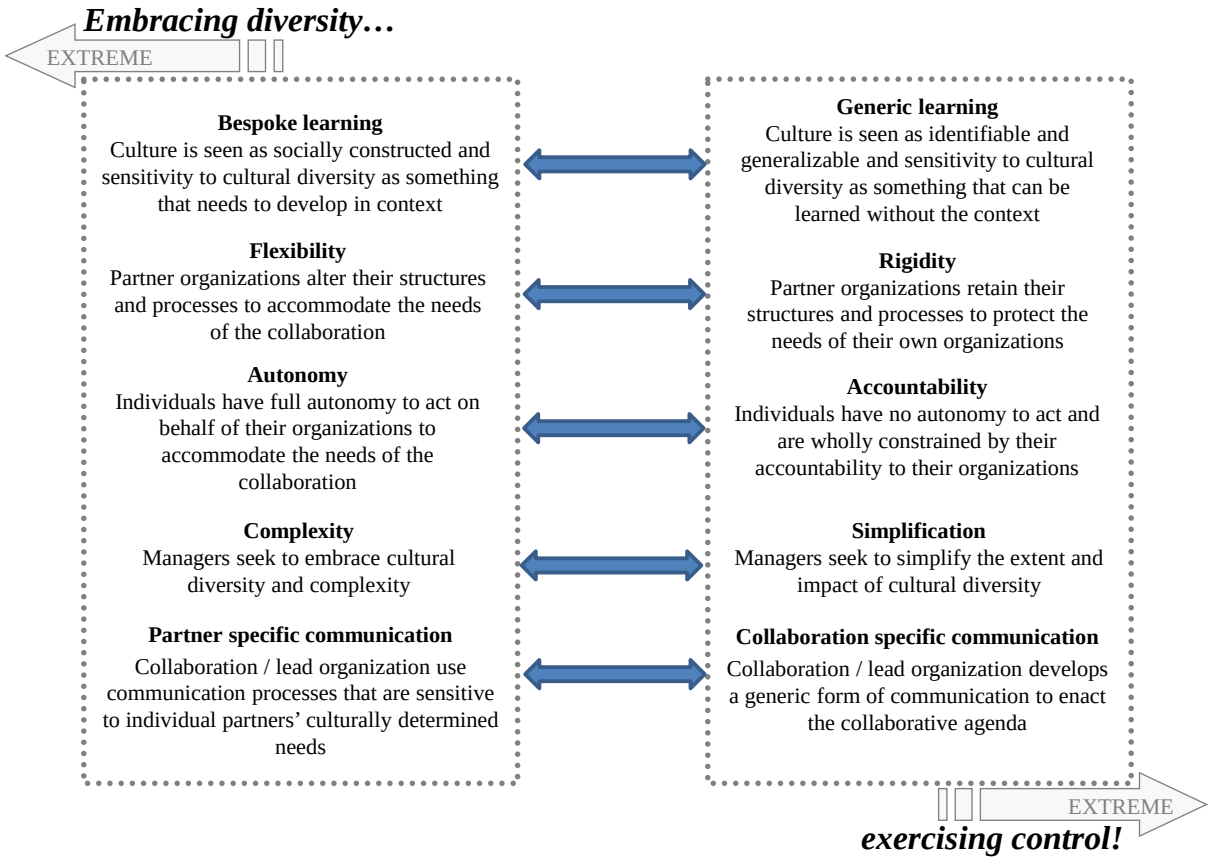

Figure 2: Example tensions: Managing cultural diversity

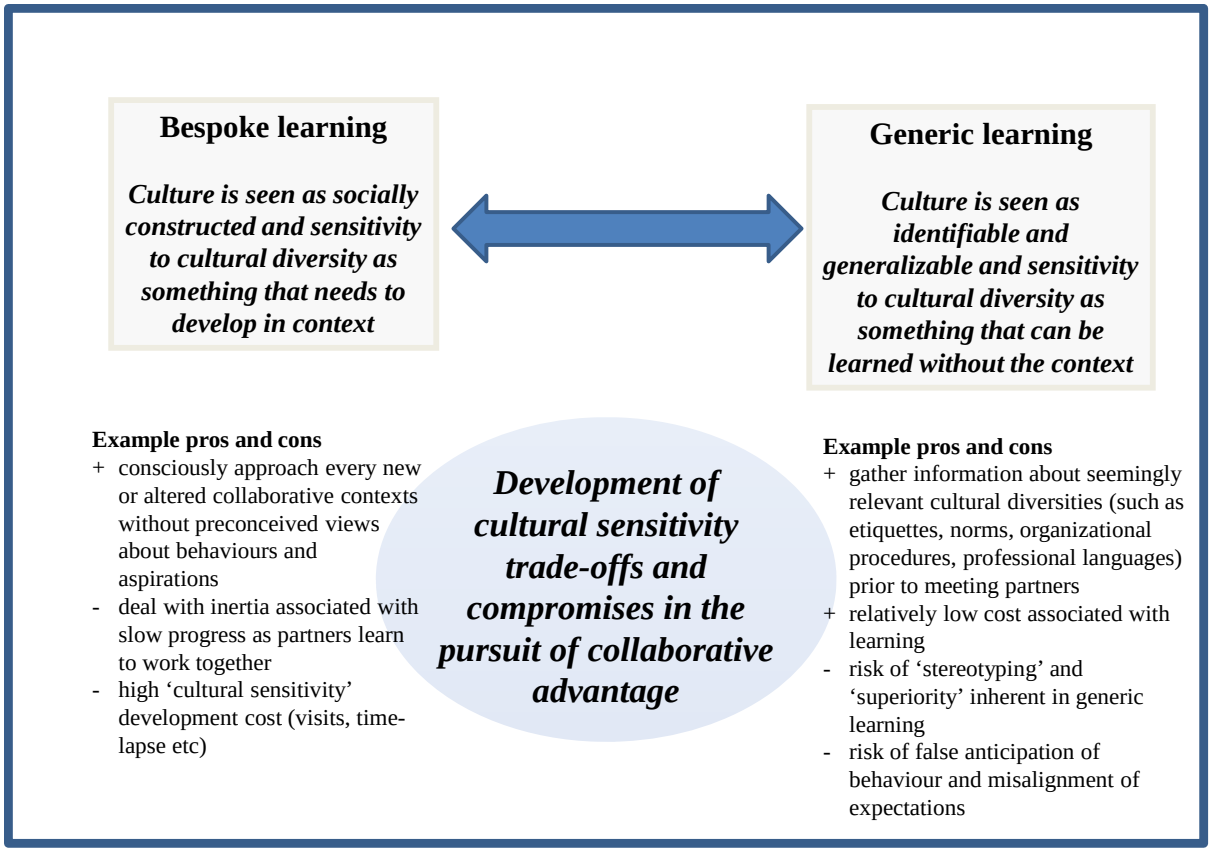

Figure 3: Example tension elaboration: Developing cultural sensitivity